

Guy Pène du Bois

The 1920s



Whitney Museum of American Art

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Named for his father's friend, the French writer Guy de Maupassant, Guy Pène du Bois was born in 1884 in New York. His father's family, eighteenth-century French immigrants to New Orleans, had moved North because of financial reverses in the wake of the Civil War. Pène du Bois' father was a newspaper journalist, working principally for the Hearst *New York American*, and an editor and translator of French literature; French was spoken in the Pène du Bois household.

Pène du Bois drew and painted from an early age. Enrolled in the New York School of Art in 1899, he flourished there under the tutelage of Robert Henri (1902–05). Henri's ideas about painting — his emphasis on the quick sketch and fluid paint handling — would influence Pène du Bois for years. But the young artist ultimately rejected the urban realist subject matter advocated by Henri and practiced by many of his students. Although themes of lower-class life attracted him at first, he eventually developed a new subject: the foibles and pleasures of America's newly affluent.

Pène du Bois' first direct experience of French culture came in 1905, when father and son left for an extended stay in France, first visiting London, then settling in Paris, where Guy rented a studio and enrolled in art classes. His father's unexpected death cut short this sojourn, and Pène du Bois came home to assume responsibilities as head of the family. Although he continued to paint, he took a job with the *New York American* as a reporter on the police beat. In 1906, he was appointed music critic, despite his complete lack of musical training. He nevertheless lasted through two seasons of performances.

Pène du Bois' schedule on the newspaper allowed him to paint in the mornings. His close inspection of opera- and theatergoers at night gradually altered the subject of his painting from the ordinary people he had encountered as a police reporter to the more worldly crowd that fre-

quented cultural events and night spots. When his stint as music director ended in 1908, he became the American's full-time art critic. The works he produced during these years, were small (most about 12×16 inches) and usually featured portraits that sometimes verged on satirical stereotypes, done from recollection.

After his marriage in 1911, Pène du Bois became step-father to three children, then father of two more, a domestic situation that further anchored him to the steady income derived from writing and left him little time to paint. Nonetheless, he was recognized as an artist-critic and an active member of downtown New York's artistic community. He helped organize the 1913 Armory Show, and had six paintings hanging in it. He also began to work for the magazine *Arts and Decoration* and contributed pieces to other periodicals and newspapers as well.

During this period, he came to know Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and her assistant, Juliana Force. Their efforts at promoting the work of living artists took shape as the Whitney Studio Club (forerunner of the Whitney Museum) which opened in 1918. Pène du Bois' paintings were featured there in a one-artist show that autumn. Mrs. Whitney and Pène du Bois both favored contemporary figurative art; he wrote often about Mrs. Whitney's sculpture, known for its iconic forcefulness, and arranged for his good friend Edward Hopper to have a one-artist show at the Club in 1920.

Juliana Force at the Whitney Studio Club (1921) was but the first of a proposed series of paintings that would have documented the activities at 8 West 8th Street, the remodeled brownstone that housed the Whitney Studio Club. Henri's lingering influence is noteworthy in this small, moody portrait. The imperious Mrs. Force is seen from behind, dressed in a long backless dress, her neck adorned with a stole or boa. Behind her, a mustachioed male is glimpsed in profile. Force, her pale back and red hair the picture's only light, looks toward a large painting hanging in the Club's gallery. Pène du Bois' reportorial skills, his deft portrayal of character through a simple pose, and his taste for lush, somber colors distinguished this painting.



Opera Box, 1926

After having rented a series of summer homes in Westport, Connecticut, Pène du Bois purchased a house and studio there in 1921 with hopes of spending more time painting. The hectic social activity of the town—he later recalled, “work was an effort made between parties”—ultimately drove him back to his Lafayette Street studio, even in summers. But the Westport respites did inspire what would become one of Pène du Bois’ largest and most accomplished works, **The Beach** (1924). A three-part painting, it portrays the Pène du Bois family and friends (again, from memory) at Compo Beach. Working on the picture in September 1924, he noted in his diary: I feel that I have done something new to me. The number of seriously and individually treated figures—there are ten—is in itself a departure. . . . Later in the same entry he speaks of his wish to give this painting a sense of “majesty.” He succeeded here, and in many other pictures of the period, by imbuing each figure with its own sense of character. This desire to ennoble his subjects helped temper his growing penchant for satire and caricature.

Pène du Bois' twofold career as artist and writer continued through the early 1920s. An instructor at the Art Students League since 1920, he also wrote a regular column entitled "Art by the Way" for *International Studio* in 1922, and contributed reviews to *The Arts* during 1923. The financier Chester Dale became acquainted with Pène du Bois through his art criticism, but soon became his most generous patron. In **Mr. and Mrs. Chester Dale Dining Out** (1924), one of a number of commissioned portraits Pène du Bois did for Dale, the stiffly seated postures embody Pène du Bois' preoccupation with the inferred meanings of body language, particularly as expressed between a couple. The commissioned portrait of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney entitled **Opera Box**, painted the same year, portrays Pène du Bois' friend and patron in a vast theatrical darkness, her dress and pose an island of light. Again, her posture—regally straight, confident and isolated—tells us much about her character.

In December 1924 the Pène du Bois family moved to France, eventually settling into a house (with studio) in Gernes, about thirty miles outside of Paris. Pène du Bois quickly assimilated into the large community of American artists living abroad, all exploiting the dollar's strength. This stay in France seems to have encouraged a greater latitude in his subject matter. Genre scenes such as **Morning, Paris Café** (1926) attest to a vision that could once again encompass the ordinary.

But the air of world-weariness and aloofness that suffuses **Americans in Paris** (1927) is more characteristic of Pène du Bois' earlier work. A gaggle of long-legged flappers, rendered in streamlined and simplified forms, impatiently stride across one of the city's bridges. Here, unlike the crowd of **The Beach**, Pène du Bois ascribes a sameness to the doll-like figures, perhaps to emphasize their social and physical conformity. Certainly during the rest of the 1920s and into the 1930s, he chose to suppress individuality in favor of highly stylized typecasting. The monumental painting of 1926, again entitled **Opera Box**, represents the apogee of this effort: a bobbed blonde amazon peers down from her box, hands on rail, her hauteur assuming physical form in her impossibly long waist and attenuated arms. More biting still is the glacial

stare of the inflated blonde at the center of **Woman with Cigarette** (1929). Two arches of dark color echo the forms of the two women, the brunette at the right presenting a tight-lipped glare that reinforces the picture's scalding severity.

Pène du Bois' growing taste for savage caricature is neatly summarized in a pair of small paintings, **Mother and Daughter** (1928) and **Father and Son** (1929). In each, the progeny retains an almost embryonic featurelessness in contrast to the parent: the simian torpor of the father, the shrill and porcine superiority of the mother—her status embodied in the rope of opera pearls draped around her stout neck. With the paws, fur, and horns grafted onto various members of the bridal party of **Country Wedding** (1929), Pène du Bois' "animalization" of human types comes to a bizarre conclusion. The nudity of the bride may be explained by Pène du Bois' recollection of the peasant wedding in Cernay-la-Ville that inspired the painting: "all [the men] looked at the bride as though they were undressing her." But along with this ironic literalism is a more subtle form of wit. The words "*Rendez-Vous des Paysagistes*" ("Meeting of Landscape Painters"), inscribed on the building above the canopy, suggest that the men are artists of a sort—but with something other than trees and fields in their mind's eye.

With the crash of October 1929 Pène du Bois was obliged to return with his family to the States and to re-enter the fray of a New York art scene that was becoming increasingly hostile to those he called the "bon viveurs" and, ultimately, to representational painting in any guise. His artistic strength as a recorder of a now beleaguered and shrinking social class began to wane in the mid-1930s. Never much interested in abstraction, he became a vocal reactionary, and the audience for both his writing and painting shrank. Teaching winters in his New York studio and summers in Stonington, Connecticut, provided some income, as did three government-sponsored murals for post offices. From 1942 to 1946 Pène du Bois taught at

Cooper Union in New York. After his wife's death, his own health deteriorated, so that he did little painting in the 1950s. His growing aversion to postwar American art prompted a final two-year sojourn in Paris in 1953. Pène du Bois spent his last years in Boston with his daughter, Yvonne, herself a painter; he died there in 1958.

For Guy Pène du Bois, the 1920s had been a halcyon decade, a period when his increased productivity was matched by a receptive audience. His five years abroad had afforded him time to paint without interruption for the first time in his life, as he cast a cold eye on a new class of grandes dames, overstuffed plutocrats, and café society. Like Hemingway and other members of the Lost Generation of American authors, he depicted the hedonistic excesses of the Roaring Twenties with both the intensity and the nostalgic objectivity of an expatriate.

Richard Armstrong, Associate Curator



Juliana Force at the Whitney Studio Club, 1921

**This exhibition is sponsored by the
Lobby Gallery Associates.**

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

Paintings

Juliana Force at the Whitney Studio Club, 1921

Oil on wood, 20 × 15

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James S. Adams

in memory of Philip K. Hutchins 51.43

The Beach, 1924

Oil on canvas, 3 parts, 21½ × 49½ overall

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

F. M. Hall Collection

Mr. and Mrs. Chester Dale Dining Out, 1924

Oil on canvas, 30 × 40

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gift of Chester Dale

Opera Box, 1924

Oil on canvas, 19½ × 24½

Collection of Flora Miller Biddle

Morning, Paris Café, 1926

Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 28¾

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

31.182

Opera Box, 1926

Oil on canvas, 57½ × 45¼

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.184

Americans in Paris, 1927

Oil on canvas, 28¾ × 36¾

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Given anonymously

Fête Champêtre, 1928

Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 29

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Mrs. Percy Uris Bequest 85.49.3

Mother and Daughter, 1928

Oil on canvas, 21¾ × 18

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.183

Country Wedding, 1929

Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 29

Private collection

Father and Son, 1929

Oil on canvas, 21 × 18

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.179

Woman with Cigarette, 1929

Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 × 28 3/4

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.187

Works on Paper

Man and Girl, 1922

Ink, crayon, and gouache on cardboard, 14 5/8 × 12 3/8

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.537

First Night, Theatre Guild, 1928

Ink on paper, 11 3/4 × 10 7/8

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.531

Trio, 1928

Ink on paper, 12 × 7

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.541

Trouville, 1928

Ink on paper, 7 5/8 × 7 1/4

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.542

Conversation, 1929

Ink on paper, 9 1/2 × 9 3/4

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.527

Girl with Cigarette, 1929

Ink on paper, 13 × 9 1/2

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Purchase 31.534

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The Beach, 1924

